

# STRESS AND THE ‘NAVIGATION OF MULTIPLE WORLDS’: EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN VICTORIA

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## ABSTRACT

Moving beyond the negative conceptualizations of stress and acculturative stress that dominate the literature, this paper will draw on interview and photovoice material from the Navigating Multiple Worlds project to explore stress as a narrative idiom, looking at the meanings of ‘stress,’ the many ways that stress can be experienced and how it can influence the ways of being in the world for immigrant youth. Rather than looking at stress as something that can be quantitatively measured, our analysis revealed that youth were talking about stress in a number of ways. This paper presents examples of stress discussed in terms of physical reactions and bodily experiences, the spatial and temporal dimensions of stress, and the importance of ‘everyday stresses’ in the lives of immigrant youth. Our participatory process, mixed methods design and focus on youth voices allowed us to explore stress as a narrative idiom, and ultimately its use as an idiom of resilience as well as distress. The potential for future research, taking an ethnographic approach to the study of stress, as a narrative tool, is highlighted.

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## BACKGROUND

Several years ago, as I was thinking about which direction to take with my dissertation research, I spoke with youth workers at the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) who identified ‘stress’ as a frequent topic of discussion among their youth clientele. They suggested that stress and immigrant youth was an area that demanded further research.

Immigrant youth in Victoria face uncertainty in many aspects of their lives. Most have little control over their family’s decision to immigrate and once they arrive, many face challenges as they navigate multiple expectations from family, school and friends. Although all youth may experience varying levels of stress, it is reasonable to suggest that immigrant youth may experience additional forms of stress as they work to renegotiate their place in their new host communities and in their relocated families.

The Navigating Multiple Worlds (NMW) project was carried out in partnership with the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS). Working with a group of immigrant youth researchers, the NMW project was developed to explore the relationship between stress, resilience and expressions of subjectivity among immigrant youth.

## METHODS

The project began with a 2-day research methods training workshop in Victoria, open to anyone between the ages of 13 and 30 that identified as an immigrant youth. The workshop participants included first and second generation immigrant youth from Brazil, Iraq, Korea, China, the Philippines, Columbia, Egypt, Bermuda, Chile and Guatemala. At the end of the workshop, participants were invited to join the team as paid research assistants, working to develop and carry out a participatory research endeavor focused on stress and documenting experiences of immigrant youth.

The design of our research process derived from community-based and participatory action research paradigms (Hemment 2007; Israel 2005). It was important to me that this research be action-oriented and as participatory as possible (Israel et al. 1998). As the research facilitator, I coordinated meetings and provided training, as well as participated in group discussions and analysis. I also carried out a secondary analysis of the interview and photovoice material that was focused specifically on stress in the context of immigrant youth experiences.

Our research process was a collaborative effort. After an introduction to research methods was provided through the workshop, six immigrant youth formed the core research team. This team developed research questions and determined the design of our

project. They decided first to carry out a series of interviews with other immigrant youth, followed by a series of focus groups to confirm the themes that emerged from the interviews. Finally, they conducted a photovoice project to gather youth perspectives on immigration and stress in a way that could be shared with a wider audience.

Photovoice uses participant-driven documentary photography to explore community issues, allowing people to “identify, represent and enhance their community, with the goals of recording and reflecting people’s personal outlook on their community” (Wang 1999:185). As part of the training workshops, the youth researchers were introduced to photovoice as a research method (Wang 1999). In recognition of the fact that English was a second language for most of our participants and research team members, the team felt strongly that arts-based methods, and photovoice in particular, was an accessible way to present and reflect on youth perspectives. In preparation for the photovoice phase of the research, a second training workshop was held, focusing on photography and ethics. After this workshop, the research team was joined by an additional five youth for the photovoice portion of the project.

The research team met on a weekly basis to develop our research processes to build capacity in research methods and skills (such as focus group facilitation and interviewing), to analyze data, and to develop resources to address issues identified throughout the research. Once the interviews and focus groups were completed, the research team worked collaboratively to develop nine themes or questions for the photovoice portion of our project. These themes included: “Navigating Multiple Worlds” (what that means to you); Who you are/ your self portrait; “Home”; The biggest challenge you

faced since coming to Victoria; What you are most proud of since coming to Victoria; What ‘stress’ means to you; What ‘belonging’ means to you; Something that makes your life easier/ something that represents support for you; and, Transformation and progress... your imagined future.

Rather than looking at stress as something that can be quantitatively measured, our analysis revealed that youth were talking about stress in a number of ways. Our participatory process, mixed methods design and focus on youth voices allowed us to explore stress as a narrative idiom, and ultimately its use as an idiom of resilience as well as distress.

## STRESS AND IMMIGRANT YOUTH

Korovkin and Stephenson (2010) describe stress as a “grand concept” and as “the key term in the master narrative of our times” (xxii). The introduction of the term ‘stress’ by W.B Cannon in the 1920s was followed by the publication of Seyle’s seminal work on stress in the 1950s. This led to a boom in stress research (Obrist and Buchi 2008). Stress has emerged as a normalized way for people to express aspects of distress or tension in their lives (Korovkin and Stephenson 2010; Obrist and Buchi 2008), and it has become a dominant explanatory framework for various forms of experiences of distress around the world (Korovkin and Stephenson 2010). The widespread prevalence of ‘stress’ and use of ‘stress terminology’ may be a response to what Sennet calls “the fundamental need for conceptual, cognitive, symbolic tools for reorienting and reconstituting the self” (Ortner 2005:44) in the face of the heightened pace of social and cultural change, innovation, and knowledge exchange in the world today.

Although all youth may experience varying levels of stress, research has identified that immigrant youth may experience additional forms of stress as they become accustomed to their new communities. While immigrant adults sometimes have the option of choosing marginalization, or remaining on the edges of their host culture (Pumariega et al. 2005), these options are often not available to immigrant children and youth as they are required to go to school and to learn and speak a new language. As a result, youth can be forced to negotiate between ‘multiple worlds.’ Youth are often encouraged by their families to remain loyal to their ethnic enclave, with departure viewed as betrayal. At the same time, those same families may be pressuring youth to succeed academically, as parents place emphasis on the sacrifices they have made to ensure the success of the next generation (Horton 2008). Meanwhile, youth are also looking to make friends in their new communities (Costigan et al.2010; Pumariega et al.2005; Wolf 1997).

The language of stress has emerged as an accessible way for immigrant youth to frame their negotiation of the multiple expectations they can face in their new communities. For many youth, stress functions as an idiom of distress. Idioms of distress are defined as “socially and culturally resonant means of experiencing and expressing distress in local worlds... They can communicate experiential states, on a trajectory from mildly stressful to the depths of suffering” (Nichter, 2010: 405). Idioms of distress respond to the need to analyze manifestations of distress in the context of personal and cultural meaning complexes (Nichter, 1981). Over the course of the NMW project, ‘stress’ was discussed by youth in relation to their experiences with the process of immigration and adjusting to a new community. Stress was also associated with negotiating the often-competing expectations of family, friends, and teachers, of finding

employment or of advancing education. The multitude of changes in support networks, socioeconomic status and daily life that can accompany immigration added to experiences of stress. Although the youth interviewed had varied experiences with immigration to Victoria, three overarching themes in terms of the way they talked about stress emerged over the course of our research processes. The following sections will illustrate the polyvalence of ‘stress’ in the lives of immigrant youth, with examples taken from the interview and photovoice materials that emphasize the physicality of stress, the spatial and temporal dimensions of stress, and the centrality of ‘daily stressors’ in the lives of youth.

## THE PHYSICALITY OF STRESS

What is stress for me? ... A headache...(laughing)... yeah I say it's a headache because it is something that is there that is bugging me because it is there and it feels like a pain, and sometimes it is hard because I feel it and I know that I want to slow down and relax a little bit, but then it just keeps on letting it happen and the amount of it piles up and then a small thing, I make it a huge thing and that is part of my stress... yeah and worrying too much, that is kind of what helps my stress level increase too much, you know small things, big things, things that are maybe not even there, and I am stressing out about it which is not good.

– Marianna, 30, Brazil

Marianna, a first generation immigrant from Brazil, was one of the older participants in the NMW project. She balances a full time job with being a single mother, and in her interview, focused largely on embodied experiences of stress, tying them back to social

and financial pressures and the need to manage multiple aspects of her life and responsibilities. Her description of stress resonates with the experiences of many of the youth who participated in our research. Many individuals discussed stress in physical terms, as ‘pressure’ or medicalized experiences: using disease-based terminology or talking about stress in terms of pain manifested in the body.

The body provides a rich backdrop from which to draw metaphorical explanations of stress. For many youth, physical experiences of stress were the most easily discussed, regardless of their level of English. One participant, a Filipino first generation immigrant, studying to be a nurse, drew frequently on biomedically oriented body metaphors, describing stress as “like cancer to me.” She describes stress as something that is constant and persistent, almost an integral part of her life – “something that is always there that I can’t get rid of and can’t live without.” She also described stress as a metaphorical ‘blockage’ in the body:

Stress for me is kinda like... it’s like... for example, you’re a vein in your body and then you have a fat, and then that fat is the stress and it blocks the blood. Something like that... So stress for me is kinda like the bondage or the hindrance in my plans... Something that interferes with something that’s really good and... stress for me, I experience it, well... especially each and every day I experience it.

– Julia, 18, Philippines

This same participant also struggled with her weight and tied her body and her desire to achieve a more conforming body directly to stress. Her image of ‘stress’ was a measuring tape.



Personally, I can handle a bunch of stress like school, work and opportunity. However, being physically fit is my Achilles heel. Throughout my childhood, I have been called “fat”, “pig”, “whale” and other things that describes being physically big. I guess I got accustomed to it that I didn’t mind whether I’m going to get skinny or not. However, as I get older, I realize that society will always be the boss of vanity. So right now, I am doing my best to be physically active but in an emotional state, it’s like stabbing me with a knife while others cheer for me.

– Julia, 18, Philippines

The emotional and physical aspects of stress were often closely intertwined in youth narratives. Discussions of stress, however, often moved beyond physical, bodily reactions to tension or adverse events. Particularly in the context of the process of

immigration, references to the spatial and temporal dimensions of stress emerged as another central theme.

## SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS OF STRESS

The image below was captured by Paulina to depict stress. Her caption, and the introductory quotation she borrowed from Eckhart Tolle elegantly presents an aspect of the temporal dimensions of stress that can confront youth after immigration. Nostalgia for the past and concern about the future, tied into a desire to meet expectations, to fulfill one's potential and make the sacrifices that often accompany the process of immigration 'worth it,' can leave people with little time to engage with the present. The stories told by many participants give a sense of operating in a reactive temporal framework, struggling to get through daily challenges, and confronting stress as it emerges. This image also demonstrates the relational dimension of stress, with some youth internalizing the stress felt by their families and particularly the stress that their parents may be dealing with.



"Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry — all forms of fear — are caused by too much future, and not enough presence. Guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness, and all forms of non-forgiveness are caused by too much past, and not enough presence."

– Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*

My dad and I share the same life path number: 3. We also happen to share many of the same self-inflicted burdens in our lives. Either we're nostalgically mulling the past or anxiously anticipating the future, but never fully living in the present. Our respective experiences in Victoria have been both stressful and challenging; a certain black hole of sorts. Of course, the grass is always greener on the other side, so that's where my dad is planning on going next.

– Paulina, 27, Bermuda/Poland/Canada

Immigration can also be construed as a disruption in time and space. Psychological and developmentalist research often focuses on the role of trauma and disruption in relation to identity that the process of immigration can cause in the lives of youth (Erickson 1968; Bhugra 2004; Hoerder et al. 2006; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). In contrast, many youth interpreted their immigration experiences not as a temporal disruption or break but as part of an ongoing process through time. With an introductory quote from Adam Gopnik, Paulina describes Ella, a first generation immigrant who reflected on the meaning of the process of immigration.



There is the feeling of being apart and the feeling of being a universe apart - the immigrant's strange knowledge that the language and lore that carry on in your own living space are so unlike the ones right outside.

– Adam Gopnik

Ella is biracial, born in Ukraine to a Ukrainian mother and Somalian father, with her childhood spent in Somalia. On top of that, she is both an immigrant and a refugee. That's a lot of things to be. To me, navigating multiple worlds can best be defined by something that Ella had to say on the topic of being an immigrant that really resonated with me. She described immigration as a process; something that doesn't have a defined beginning and ending. Rather, immigration is an ongoing transition; a never-ending process of adaptation, much like the idea of navigating multiple worlds.

– Paulina, 27 Bermuda/Poland/Canada

The perception of immigration as a process that occurs over time, or as more of a gradual process, is also reflected in the discussions of many youth with regards to how they identify themselves. Many youth saw their identity, particularly their ethnicity, as influenced by the passage of time and time since immigration. They also explained how their ideas about identity were also sometimes influenced by social context (who they are with and where they are in particular moments in time) as well as individual experiences.

But right now I'm definitely Chinese, totally, 100% a Chinese, but I have no idea about the future. Maybe in a couple years I will be 50% Canadian, 50% Chinese, but,

you know, when time goes by maybe I will feel: ‘oh I’m more a Canadian!’ Maybe later, you know, I will see... if everything goes well I’ll build my family, I think, probably I will feel more Canadian, but if you know things don’t work really well in Canada maybe I would move back to China or another place... Well I don’t know, I don’t really know.

– Ken, 25 China

I’m a Filipino. Maybe a Filipino-Canadian in a few months from now, but for now, just Filipino.

– Jonathan, 16 Philippines

Youth descriptions of sacrifices made by their families to immigrate can also include another temporal dimension of stress, with the recognition that they are going backwards, or ‘re-starting from 0’ when they leave their lives behind to immigrate. However, the idea of starting over, stopping time, or starting from 0, despite being recognized as a challenge, was not always seen only in negative terms. Participants described excitement related to the prospect of immigrating, or discussed their attempts to frame things positively in the face of major changes.

It was challenging cause all the idea to start from 0 and find new friends and not being able to be with your grandparents and the rest of your family. So it was hard I guess. It was stressful, it was hard. And like talking English at the beginning I was like super shy, and that was a big challenge and also like talking to people and then getting a job that was a challenge too, cause I was too scared to get a job.... I was just like, I was saying to myself that I was in a better place, like that I can be

someone in this place, like start over. I was, I was far from... it took a while like, accepting that you're not going to see your friends in a while and yeah, it was tough.

– Julio, 18 Guatemala

Many of the youth interviewed in the project had little power or input into their families' decision to immigrate. For some immigration was a time of great uncertainty and they described the continuation of this same uncertainty immediately after immigration.

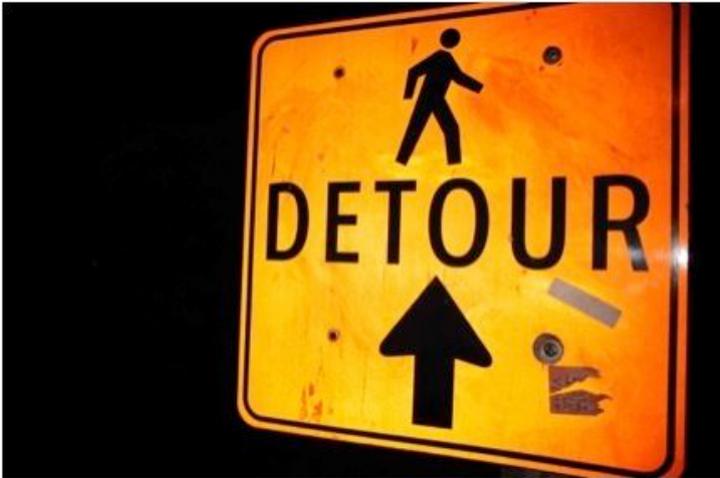
Um, I don't know about my parents but I definitely did no research into Canada. I didn't know what things would look like, what people would be like, I didn't speak the language, I didn't know what kind of opportunities I would have here, so I wasn't mentally prepared to arrive here. I just kind of came and everything was a big shock... Everything unknown. It was like going to a brand new world.

– Chris, 24, China

This idea of a brand new world, seeing immigration as a both a disruption in space and time and as a new beginning, was also reflected in the experiences of many youth. They spoke of positive as well as negative outcomes of immigration and chose not to dwell on the 'trauma' of immigration that so often emerges as a focus in the literature (Suarez-Orozco 2000). Instead, the research team and many of the youth interviewed emphasized their desire to focus not only on the negative, but also the positive aspects of immigration, implying a desire to explore the power and agency of immigrant youth.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, and in the photovoice images, many youth agentively moved from focusing on the bigger sources of stress in their lives – expectations from family, peers and school, the trauma of disruption in space and time due to the process of immigration – to smaller things, such as the daily stressors that many youth felt impacted their lives and that they felt required more attention.

### “SOMETIMES IT’S THE LITTLE THINGS”: EVERYDAY STRESSORS



Like challenges, stress is just a small detour in our daily routine.

– Isabela, 18, Brazil

Growing up in a particular place, a person knows how to be in the world, what norms are to be followed, and where they can push the envelope to express themselves, all structured by

knowledge of the familiar. Much of the literature emphasizes the bigger picture losses and trauma that can accompany immigration. In her work on immigrant youth, school transitions, and negative social mirroring (as youth begin to believe and embody the negative stereotypes they encounter) Suarez-Orozco (2000) goes so far as to title a chapter as ‘identities under siege.’ However, it became apparent over the course of this research that when the familiar no longer existed, many immigrant youth perceived that it was the little things, rather than the bigger picture ‘challenges of immigration’ that structured the ways in which they experienced stress in their daily lives.

While many youth did experience difficult transitions (exacerbated by separation from family and sources of support, language difficulties, and challenges making friends or fitting in to their new environments), overwhelmingly, discussions of ‘stress’ were matched with or framed by discussions of resilience. As our research progressed it became evident that many participants were using their narratives of stress and stressful experiences to reflect on the changes in their lives, their strength in the face of challenges and their pride in how far they had come. Rather than traumatic experiences, so often emphasized in the literature, the youth research team found that really it was “the simple, menial, everyday things that can be what cause some of the most stress for people...” (Research Team Reflections, March 2012). Simple things, like taking the bus and navigating new school environments surfaced a number of times in the interviews or became the subject of the photovoice work.

For youth who arrived in Victoria when they were school-aged, many of the daily stressors they focused on were related to

getting around school, and navigating the system without getting lost.



High school was a really big challenge for me. Making friends and just getting through it was hard. This is a picture of where I went to high school.

– Estuardo, 20 Canada/Guatemala/Chile



The level of excitement in my body to go to school everyday was somewhere around -1 and 0, I was surrounded by people and yet I was always lonely. It was an interesting experience, where by the end you can only be grateful for the people who saw and helped you, or for the ones that made it just a little harder and made you just a bit stronger.

– Isabela, 18, Brazil

Over the course of our analysis, several gaps in supports available for youth in schools emerged. Many of the youth recounted struggling with school schedules. May described her first week of school after arriving in Victoria from the Philippines:

I didn't notice that each and every day the course changes from A block to B block and then next day, it's B block and A block. And nobody supported me on that.... [And finally I asked the teacher] And then he said, oh! You're in the other classroom. What grade are you in? And I said, I think I'm in grade ten. ... And it was in the middle of a class.... I looked so confused and everybody just – one of them is kind of like laughing at me. Probably they think that I'm so stupid I can't even figure out some things.

– May, 18, Philippines

Many of these school related challenges can be attributed to the deficit of translated resources to support youth working to understand their school agendas. Indeed, this is something we worked to remedy through the creation of translated 'guides to the school agenda' in collaboration with an ESL class at a local high school. The repeated highlighting of everyday stressors as opposed to the more common focus on extreme transitions, cultural dissonance and traumatic experiences (Suarez-Orozco 2000; Kilbride et al. 2003), may have been facilitated by the design of our project. With immigrant youth interviewing other immigrant youth, a sense of shared experiences emerged. Less attention needed to be paid to the challenges of the process of immigration and the capital S sources of stress. Common experiences allowed the youth to focus on the things that influenced their everyday lives, labeled by the research team as 'the daily stresses'.

Focusing on everyday stressors also provided an accessible starting point from which youth participants and the research team were able to discuss the challenges they face. The purposive ambiguity of stress plays an important role here. In focusing on daily stressors (exams, getting around, etc.), youth may also be normalizing the challenging experiences that can accompany immigration (learning a new language, changes in family dynamics, family separation or changes in socio-economic status), allowing them to ‘fit in’ or at least discuss shared experiences of stress with their friends.

One of the youth researchers summarized our findings as follows:

We are finding out that even though we all come from different places, with different cultures and languages, we all face the same obstacles and we all go through the same challenges. What is stressful for us is dealing with homework, tests and quizzes, but also learning how to live in a different circumstance, most times without people that were always by our side. So stress developed a whole new meaning for us, and that's what we have in common, that's how we are bound.

– Research Team Reflections, March 2012

Above all, this focus on the ‘little things’ may be the result of functionality. The ‘little things’ are also the things that there may be potential to address, to take action on. Many youth have no control over their family’s decision to immigrate, but after arrival, these ‘daily stressors’ are the things they might be able to exert some form of control or power over. While learning how to navigate the city and get around on the bus was frequently discussed as a key

source of stress, after asking youth to reflect on their experiences, these activities often also emerged as an area of progress and pride. This was also true of learning English and of figuring out how to navigate the school system, and becoming more familiar with their new communities.

## STRESS AND RESILIENCE: FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Labeling something as ‘stress’ or ‘stressful’ can normalize negative experiences to a certain extent, providing individuals with an explanatory framework that research suggests is becoming increasingly universal (Obrist and Buchi 2008; Korovkin and Stephenson 2010). Rather than focusing on the negative potential of stress in the lives of immigrant youth, our research suggests that as a result of the flexible, dynamic ways that immigrant youth work with ideas of stress and identity to address the challenges they face, discussions of stress can become a way to reflect on their own resilience. Stress was first described as an ‘idiom for resilience’ by Obrist and Bucchi (2008) in their work on the meanings given to health and wellness by sub-Saharan Africans in Switzerland. Over the course of the Navigating Multiple Worlds project, we found that the youth involved in our research were also engaging with stress in this way. The polyvalence of stress language allowed youth to discuss their challenges but also to frame experiences of stress in positive terms to facilitate coping and ultimately to enhance resilience.

Mirroring the findings presented by Obrist and Bucchi (2008) which related to immigrant adults, our research demonstrated how, in using stress language, immigrant youth were also able to use the language of stress to move beyond the challenges they face and

to emphasize instead the ways they cope with stress. Viewing stress as an idiom of resilience (Obrist and Bucchi, 2008) as well as an idiom of distress (Nichter 1981, 2010) recognizes and validates the experiences and perspectives of the immigrant youth who participated in our research.

Significant constraints are placed on the lives of immigrant youth. Most described having very little input into the decision to immigrate, and many recounted having to navigate webs of obligation and expectation from parents, friends and school after they arrived in Victoria. However, throughout the project the research team's desire to emphasize the positive as well as the challenging aspects of immigration and the repeated framing of stress as an idiom of resilience in the narratives of immigrant youth suggests, as emphasized by Bucholtz and Skapouli (2009):

Young people are not simply victims or cogs of these processes. Rather, they are social and cultural agents, who despite very real limitations, manage to accomplish their most immediate goals... to position themselves as particular kinds of youth and thereby to produce new cultural practices. (p.11)

It is worth noting that the immigrant youth involved in our project were, for the most part, a 'particular kind' of immigrant youth. With one exception, they came from immigrant families, rather than refugee families, that actively chose to settle in Victoria. In order to access services from VIRCS, immigrants must be permanent residents or citizens and as such most of the youth in our project came from families that were fairly settled. There is less of a 'transient' immigrant population in Victoria than what is found in larger urban centres. Many of the youth involved had also been

previously engaged with other programs offered by VIRCS and as such, were accustomed to actively positioning themselves as ‘immigrant’ youth to access programs and services. Many of these youth had also previously participated in workshops and activities at VIRCS focused on ideas of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ which may have influenced the ways they chose to discuss experiences of stress. As such, recruiting our participants primarily from VIRCS may have contributed to the thematic agreement that emerged from our data analysis in terms of the three ways that stress was described – in terms of physicality and the body, spatial and temporal dimensions and everyday stressors.

The size of Victoria and the relatively small size of its immigrant population also influenced our findings. It is likely that if similar research were carried out in a larger urban centre, individuals may focus more on their experiences as immigrants from particular places and cultural contexts, rather than drawing on shared experiences of immigration and stress. It is also likely that in urban centres with larger refugee populations, narratives of stress could include more focus on past events that would be considered traumatic. However, during the photovoice exhibit that we held to showcase the photovoice work and to share our findings and in presentations across Canada, many members of the public (immigrant and non-immigrant) identified with various aspects of our work, suggesting our findings also speak to a broader audience.

While our process and findings are community based, and specific to a particular group of immigrant youth in Victoria, there is much that can be drawn from the NMW research that may be relevant to other communities. There is value in including youth perspectives in research related to stress and immigrant experiences. Also, considering stress as a narrative tool, rather than a quantifiable

or measureable type of “pressure,” creates a productive space for anthropology to consider stress in relation to experiences of resilience as well as distress. As ‘stress’ becomes an increasingly universal way for individuals and communities to frame and cope with challenges, further research and taking an ethnographic approach to the exploration of stress as a narrative idiom could be carried out with immigrant or refugee youth in different settings to determine how experiences and use of stress terminology may differ and where there may be similarities.

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